

Sibling Rivalry; Teaching kids how to fight with skill

When kids fight to get our attention we can respond in one of three ways:

1. We can react to their arguing, get involved, and reward them for this irritating and unwelcome behaviour.
2. We can completely ignore them, hope they work it out without bloodshed, and allow them to perhaps damage their relationship to the point of no return.
3. We can provide them with the skills and boundaries required to work out their disagreement effectively and then remove ourselves from the role of referee.

I'm a strong supporter of the third alternative as I believe it allows our children to learn important life skills and also provides us with an escape from their fighting. Before we can do this, however, we must make sure a couple of important pieces are firmly in place.

The first thing we need to do is ensure we have clear family boundaries. Boundaries are like the bottom line behaviours that will not be tolerated in our families. When it comes to sibling rivalry it is important to ensure our kids know what these are and what the consequences will be if they ignore them. Examples of things we might enforce are:

- Nothing physical: no hitting, biting, kicking, etc. You don't have to create a long list of all the possible physical things, but instead make it simple and enforce it consistently.
- No destruction of the other's property: destroying other people's property damages trust and often creates a "revengeful" mindset.
- No bullying behaviours: when you force someone to do your bidding by using size, strength, age, or other power to create fear, you are bullying.

When our kids are aware of our boundaries and the rules that enforce them, they will understand they are always in place, even when their sister or brother is pushing them to the limit.

The second thing we need to do before we can leave our kids to work it out alone, is to teach them acceptable skills. From a young age we can help them solve disagreements by modeling respectful communication and offering to help when they are stuck. As they mature, we wean them from our help so they can practice. The goal is to help them learn a variety of skills so when conflict arises they have tools to deal with it.

There are many different tools you can teach, but a few examples are: conflict resolution, problem solving, I-messages, being assertive, compromising, synergizing, negotiating, empathizing and respectful listening. A later article will go into more detail on these skills if you're not familiar with them, but for now start with what you do know and pay attention to what you are teaching.

A benefit of sibling rivalry is the opportunity to practice life skills. It is our job as parents to set up the boundaries to keep the fighting respectful and to provide the skills our children can use to work it out. With these pieces firmly in place, we still might not enjoy it, but at least we know our kids are actually benefiting from their time in the ring.

Debbie Pokornik is the owner of empowering NRG. She is the author of *Peak at Parenting; Natural, Realistic Guidance for the Busy Parent* (releasing late 2009) and believes all parents can use support at some point in their parenting experience. For other great parenting tips or to book Debbie for keynotes/workshops, go to <http://empoweringnrg.com>